

IS EUTHYPHRO A MAN BECAUSE HE IDENTIFIES AS A MAN?

Ding (din@arizona.edu)

APA Central 2025

Euthyphro's gender problem: The explanatory priority of gender vs. gender identity.

The identity-first view (virtually everybody): Euthyphro is a man because he identifies as a man.

The gender-first view (Ding): Euthyphro identifies as a man because he is a man.

My aim in this talk: I want to make a snappy first case for the gender-first view's advantages over the identity-first view, by appeal to its *explanatory power*.

HOLD ON, DING, WHAT ARE YOU EVEN ON ABOUT?

To me, the identity-first view is symptomatic of a *trans-inclusive feminist* philosophy of gender which tries but struggles to retrofit trans lives into existing cis-centric conceptual frameworks and social institutions.

In practice, trans-inclusive feminism is characteristically top-down, defensive, and anti-realist.

Gender identity as a concept is first and foremost an easy way to simplify gender for cis people.

The gender-first view, when done right, offers a promising (*radical!*) *trans feminist* philosophy of gender which begins with trans people's lived genders on trans people's own terms.¹

I offer a *building brick theory of gender* as the gender-first view par excellence.

△ I'm carving the literature up in a highly non-standard way!

Identity-first ≠ gender just is gender identity. (State-of-the-art social position views are identity-first.)

Gender-first ≠ gender is the first mover. (While neither gender nor gender identity pops into existence *ex nihilo*, we have the gender identities we do because of our genders.)

THE ARGUMENT FROM EXPLANATORY POWER

The identity-first view makes no sense of salient features of gender reality that figure in trans people's lived experience of gender.

- a) *Trial and error*: Trans people often try on different gender identities in search of something that fits and expresses our lived gender experience.
- b) *Genuine confusion*: Basically every trans person was wrong about our genders at some point, and sometimes others would even figure us out way before we do.
- c) *Retrospective recognition*: The dots might not connect until years if not decades later.
- d) *Felt Explanatory Power*: Finding the right gender identity—or absence of gender identity, or combination of gender identities—to capture one's lived gender(s) in turn feels freeing in a characteristically clarifying way.

1. I use a different case study to motivate (radical) trans feminism in my "Pregnant Persons as a Gender Category: A Trans Feminist Analysis of Pregnancy Discrimination," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 50, no. 3 (Spring 2025).

THE BUILDING BRICK THEORY OF GENDER

I think that the way to model this is *Lego bricks* × *inference to the best explanation*.

What is gender as an empirical phenomenon? Gender is the *meanings* that we make out of the relevant concrete material, personal, relational, social, political, and historical situations socially given to us, on an analogy to building with Legos.

What are our individual genders? Our genders just are *whatever* may turn out to best explain gender reality as we live and interpret it, which we in turn figure out by inference to the best explanation.

To illustrate:

“[T]he first thought that crossed my mind when I discovered that I wanted to be female was that I must be gay, an idea no doubt inspired by flamboyantly feminine gay male stereotypes that regularly appeared on TV in the ’70s. However, once I hit puberty and my sexual desire kicked in, I found myself attracted to women and not men, which only served to confuse me more, since at the time I hadn’t even heard the word ‘lesbian.’

“As time went on, I latched onto all sorts of other gender identities and theories that seemed to hold potential explanations for my subconscious feelings. For quite a while, I thought of myself as a crossdresser and viewed my female subconscious sex as a ‘feminine side’ that was trying to get out. But after years of crossdressing, I eventually lost interest in it, realizing that my desire to be female had nothing to do with clothing or femininity per se. There was also a period of time when I embraced the word ‘pervert’ and viewed my desire to be female as some sort of sexual kink. But after exploring that path, it became obvious that explanation could not account for the vast majority of instances when I thought about being female in a nonsexual context. And after reading Kate Bornstein’s and Leslie Feinberg’s writings for the first time, I embraced the words ‘transgender’ and ‘queer.’ I began to think of myself as bigendered. . . . While it felt relieving to simply be myself, not to care about what other people thought of me, I still found myself grappling with a constant, compelling subconscious knowledge that I should be female rather than male. After twenty years of exploration and experimentation, I eventually reached the conclusion that my female subconscious sex had nothing to do with gender roles, femininity, or sexual expression—it was about the personal relationship I had with my own body.”²

My framework:

Gender experience: Unstructured, uninterpreted lived experiential data that in some way reflect, express, or otherwise participate in the social meaning of sex.

Experienced gender: The gender (or absence thereof, or combination of genders) that we experience ourselves as in a given context.

(Objective) explanatory gender: The gender (or absence thereof, or combination of genders) that best explains our experienced gender—overall.

Subjective explanatory gender: The gender (or absence thereof, or combination of genders) that *we feel* best explains our experienced gender—overall.

Gender identity: The more-or-less socially intelligible labels, narratives, and/or metaphors into which we translate our subjective explanatory genders.

2. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal, 2007), pp. 83–85.